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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the philosophical perspectives that individuals bring to their study of the communication process. These perspectives, called presuppositions, include conceptions of reality (existential, essential, contextual), ways of understanding knowledge (objective, subjective, intersubjective), and types of value systems (well-defined and rigid, valueless, contextual). When the perspectives are placed on a horseshoe-shaped continuum, those at the ends reflect one-sided, extremist views in opposition to one another, and those on the arch of the horseshoe reflect a consideration for varying viewpoints, depending on the context of a given situation. The paper concludes that the effective understanding and use of key communication concepts depends on an intersubjective, contextual approach, which allows individuals to realize the relative importance of their own presuppositions and those of others. (RL)

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PHILOSOPHICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF PERSONS COMMUNICATING

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PHILOSOPHICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF PERSONS COMMUNICATING

Wayne Brockriede

Some persons will construe the question this panel confronts as an objective and dispassionate search for nonproblematic nouns. This interpretation calls to mind Francis Bacon's metaphor of chasing deer in an enclosed park and suggests the study of something caged, waiting to disclose itself to anyone who has wit and method. Persons who interpret "concept" like this want to learn what the key concepts really are so the animal called "communication" can be dissected precisely.

That communication is a process is widely accepted, but students of communication sometimes forget that studying communication is itself a process: it is an activity, a verb. Changing from "concept" to "conceiving" puts the emphasis not on the deer to be categorized but on the chase, and the deer are not in an enclosed park but in the forest at large. Perhaps looking at concepts of communication as though they were products to inventory has some value in expressing one's tentative understanding of the state of the art, but seeing the endeavor principally as a process to continue probably is more useful. The difference between these two views is a distinction between concepts-as-nouns sorted passively and persons

actively trying to choose which of several ways to conceive their study.

If one prefers the second focus, as I do, the question is how shall persons continue the chase, what kinds of activities need they understand? They need to observe and describe concrete events, to develop constructs with which to perceive and analyze them, to formulate a systematic account that interrelates such constructs, and to create a repertoire of techniques of research for dealing with problematic situations, constructs, and theories. But making and using knowledge about persons communicating also implies an understanding of philosophical assumptions persons bring with them to the process of studying. Ways of observing experience, construing it, theorizing about it, facing research questions, and philosophizing about the study are all interdependent. Persons may focus profitably on one or another of these activities. I choose to emphasize philosophical presupposing because it may well be more fundamental than any of the other pursuits.

I want to address some of the presuppositions persons have about ontological questions about what is reality, epistemological questions about how persons come to know, and axiological questions about what persons choose to value. After characterizing three apparent tendencies I find within each of these three realms, I want to identify two general styles of philosophical presupposing one may choose in understanding how persons communicate.

The model I shall use in dealing with ontological, epistemological, and axiological questions was set forth in the early 1960s by Robert Levine, an economist, for the purpose of studying policy options regarding disarmament. Imagine a continuum shaped like a horseshoe and bisected by vertical and horizontal lines. On either side of the vertical line is represented an emphasis on one or another of two values salient to a judgment or policy. In Levine's analysis of the controversy over disarmament one of the values was avoiding war and the other was anticommunism. Underneath the horizontal line is posited a systemic commitment to one ideology or another to the virtual exclusion of the other. Although I shall continue to use Levine's term to name this style of philosophizing, systemism is not to be confused with some persons' use of General Systems Theory. Levine placed at one prong of the horseshoe persons committed to avoiding a world war while virtually ignoring the cold-war value of defeating communism. He placed at the other prong persons determined to roll back communism even if doing so resulted in war.

Above the horizontal line, along the arch of the horseshoe, stood what Levine called marginalists, persons who recognized both values and made judgments in the context of concrete circumstances. Hereafter I shall substitute for Levine's "marginalist" the term "contextualist." Levine illustrated the contextualist position with John F. Kennedy's

preference for the value of anticommunism during the Cuban Missile Crisis--although he hoped to avoid war, and his preference for avoiding war in a speech six months or so later at American University--although he still saw communism as a threat.

Levine's model helps lay out options in presupposing philosophically. Ontologically, a person may define reality as existence. What is real to a systemic existentialist is a person's life experiences; presuppositional essences are virtually ignored. Persons who argue for the exclusive use of dialogic communication are systemic existentialists. The unit of analysis in any study of communication for such persons is a person's interpreted experience.

On the other hand, a person could define reality as a system of essential constructs. A systemic essentialist views the world from the perspective of form to the virtual exclusion of the phenomenal world of existence. Students of communication who impose abstractions that are necessary and sufficient conditions for their analysis are systemic essentialists.

But a person who recognizes the value of existential experience and also the value of formal essences has a third option. Such a person is an ontological contextualist and lives along the arch of the shoe. He or she can make observations, engage in analysis, theorize, philosophize, and

pursue research questions by taking account of the experiences of persons in a life world and also formal paradigms for perceiving such experiences, defining reality as the interaction between these two perspectives. Rhetorical critics who took such a stance would see a trade-off between experiential data to be collected and analyzed and formal constructs to guide their collections and analyses. Experimentalists who assumed such a position would seek data as experiential as possible and impose as much rigor of method as possible; they would try to meet some of the threats to internal validity and some of the threats to external validity. Ontological contextualists do not expect perfection and regard the existence of a nonproblematic reality as chasing a will-o-the-wisp.

Persons have a similar set of options in presupposing epistemologically. Many persons studying communication are systemic objectivists and believe knowledge is restricted to things that can be observed, described, validated, replicated, and measured objectively. Rhetorical critics of this persuasion are concerned with archives, artifacts, validated texts, exhaustive accounts of what really transpired, and the effect of the rhetorical event. Experimentalists who are systemic objectivists focus on empirical reality, want to escape contamination of their work by personal biases and intervening constructs, and aim at making their studies fully replicable. For all such persons examining the world objectively constitutes the road to knowledge.

A second epistemological position is systemic subjectivism. Persons taking this stance presuppose that knowing is to understand what a person can experience, and they are sceptical of what can be counted or measured objectively. Such an assumption is implicit in some participation-observation and intensive interviewing studies.

The third stance, epistemological contextualism, involves an interaction between what can be observed and described relatively objectively and the personal constructs by which data are interpreted. The epistemological contextualist recognizes values in both objective and subjective data, tries to cope with the tension between the two, and pursues the process of knowing by relating one's own interpretations with those of others. An epistemological contextualist is an intersubjectivist.

An analysis of axiological presuppositions by means of Levine's model is not quite parallel with the other two sets of presuppositions. One option is to endorse one value, one cluster of values, or one ideology to the virtual exclusion of competing ones. An axiological systemist is a one-valued moralist.

A second option is to reject the model altogether and occupy no place at all on the horseshoe. Such amoralism denies the relevance of values. Amoralism appears especially popular in the discipline of communication. Some students

of communication try to distinguish their territory from that of rhetoric by assigning the study of values to students of rhetoric, reserving for themselves a value-free study of who says what to whom with what effect. One paradoxical problem with any amoralist position is that the often evangelistic rejection of values from communication research itself constitutes a value, the value of being valueless.

A third axiological position is to recognize the legitimacy of competing clusters of values without accepting any of them as a system to be adhered to doggedly. Axiological contextualists weigh the significance and salience of values as they interact with circumstances within the context of a concrete controversy. Unlike moralists, contextualists apply no single value or cluster of values to render automatically their judgments. Unlike amoralists, they do make judgments, and they base them on values.

I see two general tendencies persons have in presupposing philosophically about persons communicating. Before I identify them, I should emphasize that in spite of its unusual shape Levine's model is a continuum. My intent, therefore, is not to divide the world into two kinds of nounlike persons but to suggest that verblike persons tend to pursue one of two styles of philosophizing and that they tend to do so in more-or-less rather than either-or ways.

One is characterized by the singularity of one system persons adopt for addressing ontological, epistemological, or axiological questions. A person buys into existentialism or essentialism, accepts objective or subjective ways of knowing, and determines judgments by reference to one set of values rather than others. The acceptance of one system implies the rejection of another. The advantage of a systemic tendency is consistency; its limitation is a difficulty in achieving flexibility.

One of the most interesting features of Levine's model is that the ends of his continuum bend toward one another; and by approaching one another, the prongs of the horseshoe represent a similarity in styles of thinking between extremist positions. Although existentialism and essentialism are based on very different ways of defining reality, they share with one another a reliance on one systemic definition rather than others. Objectivists and subjectivists share the same philosophical style even though they pursue the process of knowing in opposing ways. Moralists of divergent systems of values share with one another a determination to uphold a code, forsaking all others.

The other tendency is characterized by a tolerance for competing ontological, epistemological, and axiological positions. They are willing to cope with the tension between dialectical extremes, and they have the capacity to select

from their repertoires of constructs those most appropriate for dealing with a context of concrete circumstances. Its advantage lies in its adaptability; its challenge in every given case is to achieve consistency.

What can I conclude from this analysis? First, although I have not identified my own preferences, my language no doubt has revealed them. I am a contextualist. One advantage I have over persons near one of the systemic ends of the continuum is that I am compelled to recognize my dependence on their work. I can learn to cope only with whatever dialectical extremes they create.

The systemist's reliance on the work of contextualists may not appear so obvious. If one accepts Kuhn's relatively systemic model of revolution, the advancement of learning may be supposed to occur when persons jump from one prong of the horseshoe to the other. But such leaps are provoked by the discovery of anomalies in a system, and contextualists may uncover such blemishes more often than systemists. And if one accepts Toulmin's relatively contextualist model of evolution as accounting for change in modes of conceiving, the contextualist--by seeing that one construct need not destroy its opposite--can help persons pursue the process of understanding. I conclude that the two ways of conceiving philosophical presuppositions are interdependent.

Second, understanding differences in philosophical presupposing is useful in all our activities. Knowing our own presuppositions and those of others will influence profoundly what concept of reality, what modes of knowing, and what sets of values undergird the interdependent group of activities persons involve themselves in while chasing a better understanding of the process of persons communicating: what to observe and describe, what constructs to develop and use for such purposes, how to go about the job of theorizing, how to design research studies to solve problems, and what techniques may be used to implement the design. One is not likely to make good judgments about how effectively persons are chasing key concepts in communication in the absence of an understanding of the kinds of philosophical presuppositions they have made or without recognizing whether the implicit philosophical style is relatively systemic or relatively contextualist.